



MOHANDAS KARAMCHAND GANDHI'S VIEWS ON WOMEN: AN OVERVIEW

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

This paper focuses attention exclusively upon the views that the Father of the Nation – Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi held about women – their role and position within the family and in the society at large. Gandhi is overtly credited for giving a mass base to the nationalist movement of India beginning with his unique Satyagraha movements in Champaran and Kheda at the beginning of his political career in India. There is no doubt that masses of rural India, both men and women responded to his call of passive resistance along the lines of Satya (Truth) and Ahimsa (Non – violence) to resist the massive and powerful colonial state apparatus. However, what needs closer examination is whether the leader who embraced women as co – patriots in the nationalist struggle was a believer in the equal agency and autonomy of women as men. This paper does not intend to judge Gandhi's views on or regarding women from the essentially Feminist lens but simply revisits his notions about women's role and responses that Gandhi held to be appropriate. In this paper, the author has used Gandhi's own writings and well – known scholarly secondary resources to examine Gandhi's views on women related to specific issues that were relevant in shaping the lives of women during Gandhi's times like: equality of the sexes, marriage, child marriage, dowry system, divorce, women's chastity, honour, birth control and artificial sterilization, purdah system, women's participation in the Satyagraha movement, economic self – reliance.

Keywords: *Equal agency and autonomy of women, Equality of the sexes, Child marriage, Dowry system, Purdah system, Chastity and honour of women*

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (2 October, 1869 – 30 January, 1948) was a prolific writer, an intense thinker, a spiritualist, a philosopher and the first mass leader of the freedom struggle of India. By his own admission, he was not a political thinker per se, but his copious writings and speeches, touching upon almost all aspects of human existence during his times make him relevant to social and political thought today and for the foreseeable future as well. Gandhi had the ability to look at existing phenomenon, customs and conventions in a manner that was different from common perception. He was by no means an iconoclast but definitely he was an innovator. He could look at the old in a new light and with the aid of his charismatic personality, he could influence many people to think and do things differently. Gandhi's views on women are no exception. In India, as in most other parts of the world at that time, women were looked upon as inferior to men. They were considered to be both physically and intellectually inferior to men and so the private domain of the household was considered to be best suited to them. Child-bearing and child-rearing, housekeeping, household chores were considered to be the woman's forte. Their existence was centred around the predominant male figure of their lives: their fathers, husbands and sons. That women possessed an identity and independent personality and thinking was not acknowledged at all. In fact, they enjoyed neither the privilege of education nor the luxury of right to property. Hence, families in India had been typically patrilocal, patrilineal and patriarchal. This was reflected in the structure of society as well. As men were considered to be intellectually and physically superior of the two sexes, they alone participated in the social and political spheres and they alone were entitled to power, both within and outside the realm of the home.

In this paper we shall discuss Gandhi's views on women under particular headings, so that we may clearly understand what Gandhi thought about these various issues related to women more clearly.

- a) **Equality of the Sexes:** Gandhi did not believe that women were inferior to men. Rather, he thought that they had different tendencies, capacities and inclinations from those of men. He said that women were the companions of men, 'gifted with equal mental capacities'. Gandhi preached that woman had every right to participate in every activity of man and insisted that they had every right to liberty as men did. However, they would have to change the way in which they saw themselves. Women alone could change the way they were looked upon by society and they should bring about this change by refusing to play mere ornamental roles to their male counterparts in all social and public occasions.

He did not think that women did not deserve to be educated. In fact, he insisted upon women being educated so that they could complement men in all social and political activities. He thus removed the public-private divide that had become popular globally with respect to determining the roles and functions of women in society. Gandhi encouraged the woman to stop thinking of themselves as the 'objects of sexual gratification' of men. His ideas earned him many women followers and definitely increased the number of women who participated in political movements in India. Women felt emancipated from the age-old shackles of tradition that relegated them to their homes and killed their initiatives that could benefit society in the long run.

- b) **Marriage:** Firstly, Gandhi was vehemently opposed to the practice of child marriage. He considered child marriage to be a moral and physical evil. It was a custom that did not allow the full development of the personality of the child and forbade the child brides from being in a position to make conscious choices about their own bodies and minds. He believed that marriage was a sacrament, a sacred bond, that needed preservation from both the partners, not just the wives. Marital fidelity or loyalty was not to be expected from women alone while allowing men the right to have multiple partners and also the right to remarry. Moreover, according to Gandhi, marriage was a social bond to legitimise the birth of children and he insisted that having borne a child or two even a married couple should exercise sexual abstinence. In this regard, *brahmacharya* was to be a virtue that was desirable for both men and women and also insisted that this sexual abstinence could not be imposed from outside but rather had to arise spontaneously from within both the husband and the wife. Gandhi also supported remarriage of child widows because he did not consider them to have been truly married at all. Gandhi supported arranged marriage and further proposed that men above the age of twenty-five should be consulted by their parents while arranging their marriage. He went to the extent of saying that the only honourable terms in marriage are mutual love and mutual consent. Gandhi was also sensitive to the miseries of widowhood and abhorred the right of a widower to remarry, almost immediately after the demise of his wife whereas a widow was expelled from enjoyment of life on account of losing her husband! He wrote that voluntary widowhood chosen by women to practice sexual abstinence is better than compulsory widowhood imposed by custom. The latter inevitably creates space for sexual promiscuity and does more harm than good.
- c) **Dowry System:** According to Gandhi, the dowry system was a product of the caste system and could be done away with only when the caste system is abolished. The dowry system was one of the many insults that women in India had been afflicted with and Gandhi was so staunchly against the system that he proposed that any man who demands dowry should be excommunicated or boycotted by society. He encouraged parents of young girls to opt for inter caste marriages rather than submit to the derogatory practice of giving dowry. In this case too, he wanted young women to desist the practice of dowry and wait for their ideal suitors rather than marry any available caste boy by paying dowry. Unless the women resisted this practice, it could not be done away with.
- d) **Divorce:** Gandhi did not subscribe to the taboo associated with divorce in India during his times. Moreover, he gave the right to dissolve a marriage both to men and women. Since he too believed that marriage was a sacred bond, the fidelity or faithfulness to marriage vows had to be adhered to by both men and women and fidelity was to be moral and not just physical.
- e) **Women's chastity/purity:** In this regard too, Gandhi's views were different from the traditional view. Gandhi believed in purity of thought and laid more emphasis upon it than physical purity. He also insisted that chastity or purity of the body had been wrongly associated with women alone in Indian culture and tradition. Men too should strive to achieve and acquire chastity of thought and that should be reflected in their physical habits. He did not support the view that chastity was a virtue of women alone and neither did he believe that chastity could be measured on physical grounds alone.
- f) **Women's honour:** Having said whatever is written in the foregoing point, Gandhi still discussed at length how a woman should attempt to protect her honour. He believed that it was physically impossible to violate a woman against her will. Whenever a woman's honour was at risk, Gandhi insisted that she should use all her strength of mind and body, her teeth and her nails to protect her honour. In most cases of violation of modesty of a woman, Gandhi felt, the criminals succeeded in their evil intentions not because of their superior physical strength but because of the fear in the minds of the women!
- g) **Birth control and artificial sterilization:** Considering the population of India and its rate of growth, Gandhi preached the need to control the rate of birth in India but did not support artificial sterilization and birth control measures. He believed that if the masses had access to artificial means of sterilization, there would be gross moral decay and uncontrolled and even promiscuous relationships. All control with regards to physical needs and their fulfilment would be lost and society at large would face moral decay. He suggested that birth control should be voluntarily practiced by married couples and that would improve the quality of their relationship and companionship. This control had to be exercised by both men and women as both were equal partners in the marital bond. He preached '*brahmacharya*' as a means of birth control would be both spontaneous and would help to build a strong character in both men and women and they could dedicate their lives to more meaningful services to the community.
- h) **Purdah system:** Gandhi considered the system of 'purdah' to be 'vicious, brutal and barbarous'. He believed that the 'purdah' system depicted a 'morbid anxiety' about the chastity of women and further opposed it on the ground that the

same culture that pushed women into seclusion did not allow women to question the chastity of men in any manner. In fact, the chastity of men was not a matter of concern at all in India, as if, being a man meant entitlement to freedom of choice, thought and action, whereas, being a woman meant that they would have to be the receptacles of virtue and chastity and the upholders of tradition and customs. Gandhi pointed out that it was these very traditions and customs that had turned pernicious and was responsible for dehumanizing women in India and relegating them to non-entities.

- i) **Women and Satyagraha:** Gandhi had immense faith in the inherent capacity that women possessed for both truth and non-violence. He constantly urged women to tap their inner reservoirs of patience, love, tolerance, determination and to channelize these qualities towards service to community. He also believed that women had less physical appetite and voluntary 'brahmacharya' would come instinctively to them. They were thus, potential foot soldiers of the Satyagraha movement. Gandhi thus resented those traditions and customs of Indian society which had, instead of harnessing these latent potentials in women, had subjugated and repressed them to lead a meaningless existence. However, one thing must be kept in mind at this point: Gandhi did not want women to break away from all traditions of society but wanted them to carve out a niche of 'service rather than power' within the prevailing social structure. At Gandhi's call women participated and organized political protests, staged public picketing, courted arrest, and were the first to ignore and mitigate the boundaries set by caste and religion. The nationalist movement of India became imbued with a feminist fervour and the women on their part realized that they too had a meaningful role to play in the movement against the foreign rule.
- j) **Economic Self-reliance:** Gandhi, despite all his adulatory views about women, failed to visualise women as being capable of economic independence. He wanted women to be educated so that they could in turn play a positive role in the education and upbringing of their children. He did not however, think that a woman's education could enable her to earn a substantial income to support herself or her family. She could at best take to spinning 'khadi'. This might enable her to make a contribution to her family's income and keep her engaged during her idle hours besides catering to the nationalist agenda. In fact, he calls spinning 'a widow's best companion'!

Evaluation

The above discussion summarizes the basic ideas that Gandhi had regarding different aspects of the lives of women in India. While going through the above discussion itself we might have noted certain positive features and certain not-so-positive features. We must remember that every thinker should be judged or evaluated within the particular temporal and spatial context within which he was located. It would be unfair to dismiss the thoughts and views of social and political thinkers simply because they seem dated to us. Moreover, a personality like Gandhi, who did make an undeniable impact upon the freedom struggle of India and gained global recognition because of his emphasis on unique modes of protest: satyagraha and passive resistance cannot be dismissed summarily because his ideas regarding women seem outdated and limited in scope to us today. Keeping this in mind, let us discuss below a few limitations or drawbacks on Gandhi's ideas on women:

- Michael Connellan in an article for The Guardian, titled "Women suffer from Gandhi's legacy" (dated 27 January, 2010) pointed out that "Gandhi was a puritan and a misogynist who helped ensure that India remains one of the most sexually repressed nations on earth – and by and large a dreadful place to be born a woman." This criticism of Gandhi's views on women cannot be totally ignored nor negated. It is true that though Gandhi spoke about the equality of the sexes, he never took up the project of breaking down the stereotypes of gender in India. In fact, it would be more correct to say that he never wanted to break away from these gender stereotypes. Rather, he took refuge under the "feminine" methods of passive or non-violent resistance and satyagraha as opposed to the "masculine" brutalities of the British empire.
- Gandhi's notions on celibacy or brahmacharya and the extreme distaste with which he regarded sex for pleasure as opposed to sex for procreation has also been criticised as unnatural and artificially imposed from outside and one that would resign India to "the hell of celibacy" in the words of Martin Luther.
- Moreover, Gandhi was a puritan who believed that women should take responsibility for all types of sexual assaults and undesirable advancements rather than the men who make these assaults and advancements. This mentality has deep roots in Indian tradition and has staunch supporters even today. Many of the states of Northern and North Western India, with the highest incidence of rape, female foeticide and inverse sex ratio depict the females as responsible for all crimes against women, blaming them for either provoking or consenting to sexual assaults.
- Gandhi's views about the need of educating women is also only partially liberating because beyond the primary knowledge of the letters, the women were to remain confined to home and hearth, give birth to and raise good, well-mannered children and in free time, to spin. He did not propose to educate women so that they could work shoulder to shoulder with men and be bread-earners of the family.
- Though Gandhi calls marriage a sacred bond, a sacrament, he did not think that marriage was a bond between two equal individuals. While he proposed that men not marry before the age of twenty-five, he endorsed arranged marriage and gave the men the right to be consulted by their parents regarding the match. He did not give any such liberty or right to the woman.
- He did advocate remarriage of child widows but conveniently remained silent on remarriage of adult widows. He preferred these widows to dedicate their entire life and energy to the service of the community, forgetting that these widows were mortal creatures with their own emotional and physical needs.

- Gandhi's thrust upon non-violent means of protest inflicted and re-endorsed the traditional violence against women though he did encourage the participation of women in political movements but his disproportionate emphasis upon celibacy, chastity and sexual repression did not improve the position of women in India.

Conclusion

The author feels a sense of disquiet and dissatisfaction after examining Gandhi's views on women, not because he was not an outright Feminist but because he came so close to being a true champion of women's liberation and empowerment. It appears that Gandhi had began on the journey of bringing women in India out of the restricting confines of gender stereotypes by emphasizing upon the inherent equality of the sexes and the innate moral strength and superiority of women in comparison to men but, he stopped mid – way. In stead of insisting upon giving women the right to education that could guarantee her future financial independence and self – reliance, Gandhi kept even educated women confined to being care – givers, nurturers and birth – givers. His extra emphasis upon the moral strength and superiority of women was just another discursive route to glorify the mundane gender roles that had been imposed upon women traditionally in the name of customs and conventions in India since ancient times. His criticism of child marriage and dowry system provide some, though not adequate relief to women. However, we must once again remind ourselves that each individual is a product of his time and space and to dismiss Gandhi's views on women summarily would be unjust to one of the prime leaders of India's nationalist struggle who had undoubtedly opened the political arena to innumerable ordinary women of India.

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